

# A Better Time

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What would it do to you if the person you loved was gone forever? For Hinata the answer is a dark one. Character Death. One shot. Hinata X Naruto, slight Neji X Tenten.

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## Choosing the path

Neji walked quietly toward the practice field. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to accomplish. He had tried to help before and hadn't gotten anywhere. It wasn't as though anyone had given him any helpful suggestions. *Go and talk to her.* Sure, talk to her, and say what *exactly* ? As he approached he could hear her grunting and the loud cracks of her fist hitting a tree. He could see no less than seven felled trees near her and the one she was hitting was already broken about a third of the way through. Well at least she had been busy. That had to be better than just moping in her room. He stopped about ten yards behind her and was about to speak, still not sure of what to say.

"Hello Neji." She beat him to it. Her Byakugan was active so it was not a surprise that she knew he was there. "Did you come here on your own or did someone send you?"

"Actually I was requested to speak to you by both Hokage-sama and Kurenai-san. They are both concerned for your well being Hinata-sama."

"Big brother Neji I've told you before you don't have to call me that when we're not in front of Hiashi. Call me Hinata-chan or just plain Hinata."

She never stopped hitting the tree the entire time she spoke. She had changed and her appearance was just one example. Her hair was now kept very short and rarely seemed to be combed. All she had on were knee length black cargo pants and a black cotton tee shirt that was drenched in sweat. She did not seem to care much about appearance anymore and black had become her primary color. There had been many other changes as well.

"Hinata everyone is concerned about you."

"I assume everyone does *not* include Hiashi." The bitterness in those words was a surprise. It sounded like something he might have said before he'd found out the truth about his own father's death. Hinata *never* spoke about anyone in that tone, least of all Hiashi.

"While it is true Hiashi-sama has not inquired about your circumstances I am certain he is also concerned."

"Neji why are you bothering? You and I both know my father thinks I'm worthless."

"Hinata that is not true!"

"It is and we both know it. The only thing that's changed is that I've stopped caring." There was no heat to those words, no feeling at all. His own Byakugan showed him no increase in her heart rate.

"Hinata I want to try and help."

"There's nothing to help Neji, I'm fine."

"Then why are you crying?"

One of her punches missed the mark, and after a couple more she stopped. She just stood there, her back to him, sucking in air and huffing as her heart rate began to drop. He didn't say anything; he was nothing if not patient. After a couple moments of silence she turned around to face him. Her cheeks were wet but she actually had a grin. "Sometimes I really do hate the Hyuga 'gift.'" He nodded, he'd felt the same way many times. "I'm not crying because of Hiashi if that's what you're thinking."

"You're crying because of him." He said simply. It was no secret what had caused the radical change in her. "Hinata I understand..."

"No Neji I really don't think you do." Her words were completely cold. "Have you ever once in your life loved someone with your whole heart, without reservation, without condition?"

Neji stiffened and looked her dead in the eye. "My father."

It was Hinata who looked away. When she spoke her voice finally carried a little emotion, a little of the old caring Hinata. "Neji I am sorry, I apologize."

He nodded and let out a breath, he really wasn't angry with her. "It is all right Hinata, but you see I do understand what it is to lose someone who means everything to you."

"And look what it did to you, you only spent ten years blaming fate for everything and hating the Hyuga main branch. I wouldn't describe you as cheerful or happy during any of that time."

"That's true Hinata. I did suffer for a very long time from the death of my father. It is because of that I wish to help you avoid that same fate."

She laughed. That caught him by surprise. She quickly got it under control. "Forgive me Neji, it's just funny to me to hear you, of all people, talk about avoiding fate."

"I have changed Hinata."

She nodded. "And who was it that helped you change?" He stared at her. They both knew the answer to that. "I don't think I am going to be as lucky." She picked up a towel from her bag and began to dry off.

He knew she would not want to hear what he was about to say, but he could think of nothing else. "Naruto would not want this for you."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than she acted. Even with his Byakugan active she moved almost faster than he could see. She activated her Jyuuken fighting style and covered the distance between them in one bound. He had barely enough time to get his arms up before she was on him. She struck fast and hard hitting eight chakra points on his chest and closing them. He

immediately felt as if his ribs were caught in a vice. He could barely breathe, for all his strength and skill he dropped to his knees and struggled just to keep breathing. Hinata was over him her left palm drawn back and ready to strike, her eyes filled with a furious hate. "**DON'T YOU DARE TELL ME WHAT NARUTO-KUN WOULD HAVE WANTED! YOU BARELY KNEW HIM, I LOVED HIM!**" He really thought Hinata was ready to kill him for what he'd said.

Though it hurt like hell Neji managed to say something. "I... know... he... wanted... friends... happy." With that her eyes changed. The anger in her eyes was muted and he saw fresh tears.

Her left hand snapped forward hitting his chest eight times again. Suddenly the vice was gone and he could breathe easy. He stayed there on his knees though; he didn't have the energy to get up. She turned away from him. "Neji I'm sorry, please forgive me." The sorrow in her voice was raw and he didn't need his special vision to know she was choking back tears.

"It is all right Hinata I understand. No one thinks you shouldn't mourn him, but it has been a month."

"Has it really? It's only felt like a week or so. I guess time flies when you're busy."

"Hinata it is time for you to return to your training and your team."

"No, my time with team 8 is over and I'm done with medical jutsus. I've got about two more months of training and then I'm going to apply for ANBU black ops unit."

Neji stared at her. She could not have shocked him more if she had told him she was a Mist Nin deep cover agent. "Hinata! That was Kakashi's old unit, they specialize in assassination." She simply nodded. "The Hokage will never allow it!"

"I'll pass the ANBU exam Neji and if she refuses to place me in black ops I'll leave Konoha and become a missing nin."

Neji got up to his feet and went over to her. She was crying but her face was set. "Hinata don't even joke about that!"

"I mean every word." She looked at him. "How many men have you killed Neji?"

He stared, what had happened to her? What the hell had happened to her? "Eleven that I'm sure about, maybe more like twenty or thirty. You can't always be sure in a big fight." This was not something he ever liked talking about even with his teammates, talking about it with her seemed wrong.

"They say Kakashi killed over 200 while he was with them. Do you know I've never killed anyone? That's why I have to get into black ops; I have to learn how to kill. I have to learn how to do it well and without hesitation."

"Why? Hinata what could you possibly need to know that for?"

"Because it's the only way to fulfill my dream."

He looked at her in confusion, none of this made sense. "I thought your dream was to become head of the clan."

"No Neji that was never my dream. Hiashi and Hinabi can do whatever they want with Hyuga I don't give a damn. I used to have two dreams. First I wanted to win my father's respect. Second I wanted Naruto to return my feelings or at least acknowledge me. I've lost them both, one dream is gone forever and the other doesn't matter to me anymore. So I have come up with a new dream to give me something to strive for."

He was dreading this but he needed to know. "What's your new dream Hinata?"

She smiled a cold smile. "How much do you know about how he died?"

"Not much really, just that it was an S-rank in Tea country and that Akatsuki was involved. I've run into Kakashi, Sakura, and Kiba but none of them would say anything. For that matter neither would Hokage-sama or Kurenai."

"There was a reason for that. As soon as they received Kakashi's mission report the Council got together and passed a decree making the mission details an S-rank secret. Anyone revealing those details would be subject to immediate execution without trial. So that not even Tsunade could tell anyone the truth about what happened to him. You see..."

"Hinata! Whatever you might feel you can't tell me an S-rank secret!"

She motioned for him to calm down. "I'm telling you Neji. If you want to report me to the ANBU go ahead I won't blame you, I might even thank you." There seemed nothing for him to do but listen. "It was a mission to Tea country and Akatsuki was there in the form of Uchiha Itachi and Kisame Hoshigaki they were after the six tails demon. But we had information about a third party as well. Since Itachi was there his little brother was coming out to play too."

"You mean Uchiha Sasuke was there as well?"

She nodded. "We had a report from one of Jiraiya's agents Sasuke would be there as soon as his older brother appeared. The mission goal was basically to capture the 'good' Uchiha and kill everyone else." She stopped then. "The night before everyone was in a good mood. We all really thought we could do it. Sakura and Naruto were especially excited they really thought once they got Sasuke back to Konoha and the curse mark removed everything would be fine. Naruto would get his best friend back and Sakura would get back her precious *Sasuke-kun* ." She spat the word out. "As it turned out Naruto and I shared the last watch. You know I think, no I know, Kakashi did that on purpose. He probably had some weird idea that something would happen and one of his little Icha Icha scenes would play out. Well nothing like *that* happened. But we..." Hinata stopped, even after a month the pain was still so raw, the memory so fresh.



Would it ever stop hurting like this? "We talked, it was the best talk we ever had. He was practically bouncing he was so ready to go. And I was happy to just be there, the only one with his attention. He was paying all his attention to me and I was loving it. We talked about the academy, the exams, old missions, and then he asked me..." She stopped, the tears were coming again. Why couldn't she stop crying? "He asked me if I had a boyfriend, or someone special I cared about. I told him I didn't have a boyfriend, but that there was someone very special to me. He wanted to know who, but of course I couldn't say because it would have been too *embarrassing* ." She made the word sound like a curse. "He told me that whoever it was he was very lucky because I... I was... a great girl... and any guy would be lucky to have me." She took a deep breath. "I asked him if he had someone like that. I thought he would tell me about Sakura. But he told me he didn't have anyone since he knew that Sakura would only ever love Sasuke. He had accepted they would never be more than friends. He told me he hoped... he could... he wanted... to find... a girl... who... who could... love him." The dam burst and she couldn't talk anymore.

Neji had never been good at showing his feelings or comforting others, but he did what he could. He put his arms around his cousin and told her it would be all right. He let her cry for as long as she wanted and tried to assure her she would get through this, that the pain would not last. After a time the tears finally stopped. She stepped away from him, dried her eyes and continued.

"When he said those words my heart was pounding so hard I really thought it might burst. I should have told him. I should have wrapped my arms around him and told him he already had someone who loved him and always would. But I couldn't, even then, when we were alone and he was crying to be loved I still couldn't tell him. So I did what I always did; I smiled and I blushed and I promised myself I would tell him later *at a better time*. I was such a coward. This precious boy who was my inspiration, this lonely soul who I had loved and admired for *eight years* and I couldn't tell him that he wasn't alone, that he was loved. All because I could never muster up

enough courage to say three little words. I had a hundred chances. The day of the Genin exam when he was all alone, at our first Chunin exam, right here on this field before he went in to fight you Neji, all those times I visited him in the hospital, after all the missions we were on together, before he left with *Jiraiya*, when he came back after *two years*, and every other time I saw him I could have told him. Even if he had told me no, even if he had still wanted Sakura, I could have let him know my love was his if he ever wanted it. And every single time I chickened out because I couldn't bear to hear him tell me he didn't feel the same. I always told myself there would be a *better time*."

She looked at Neji and tried to drive her words home. "What I never let myself think about was that we were shinobi and that we lived with death every single day. I knew of course that death could come at any time. It was the first lesson at the academy and I had seen first hand how fragile even the life of a powerful shinobi could be. We are never promised tomorrow, all we ever have is today."

Neji felt uncomfortable at her earnestness. "What happened in the fight?"

She did not mince words. "It was a disaster. The six tails was a black bear about the size of the Hokage monument. Akatsuki appeared and then so did Sasuke with four ninjas with curse seals. Before we even engaged them we learned the Uchihas had something else in common. Itachi summoned a gigantic wolf, so not to be outdone the little Uchiha summoned Manda the boss snake demon. Then Naruto amazed me and the rest of my team by summoning a gigantic frog called Gama Bunta. The three summons and the six tails all went for each other in a crazy four way fight. Itachi and Sasuke fought each other while we had our hands full with Kisame and the curse seal ninjas. I have never been in a fight like that and I hope I never see another one like it. After awhile the snake and the frog were gone which left the six tails and the wolf summon. Kakashi and Kiba both went down fighting Kisame while Naruto, Shino, and Kurenai were fighting three of the cursed seals. The fourth cursed seal attacked

Kisame while Sakura and I got Kakashi and Kiba healed and out of harms way. By the time we got done with that the three curse seals Naruto's group had been fighting were all down but so was Kurenai, Shino was still standing but most of his bugs had been burned up in the fight so he couldn't really do any more. Kisame had killed the cursed seal he'd been fighting but was hurt bad and was pulling out. So that just left Naruto, me, Sakura, Itachi, and Sasuke." She took a deep breath.

"The Uchihas were both still fighting and right then the wolf summons disappeared. When that happened the six tails left and Itachi went after it. Sasuke was going after Itachi. But pinky got in his way, she didn't attack him or do anything other than beg him to stop. Sasuke was in full curse seal mode and activated his Black Chidori and told her to get out of the way. She stood her ground and Sasuke went straight at her, ready to kill her so he could chase after his brother. But of course Naruto got in front of her and went for Sasuke with a giant Rasengan. I was still running to get to Naruto while Sakura just stood there and watched the two of them collide. When they hit there was a burst of power that blinded my Byakugan for a few seconds. When I could see again Sasuke had gone rushing past Sakura without even a look back. And Naruto... was lying face down in a pool of his own blood. He was still alive, but I could see his chakra beginning to fade. I ran to his side and put him over on his back. There was a hole in his chest and his heart had been damaged. Sakura and I both poured our chakra into him but there was nothing we could do." She stopped again, but there were no more tears, she thought she was out of them. "I saw his chakra going but his eyes were looking up at mine. I screamed his name and told him that I loved him and would always love him for as long as I lived. And my darling boy smiled up at me and he said my name, and then he was gone. The last thing my Naruto-kun ever said was my name."

She shook her head. "I don't remember anything after that; the next thing I can remember was being at his funeral and Tsunade's proclamation. Naruto would be recognized as a hero of the leaf who

spent every day of his life protecting the village from the Kyubbi. He held the nine tails inside of him and I never even knew. I think he would have liked the statue outside Hokage Tower and I think he would also have liked knowing the academy would teach that he was one of Konoha's great heroes. Amazing how the Council went along with that. They never gave him any credit while he was alive but they were just so generous once he was gone. Though not generous enough to tell the truth about dying at the hands of the traitorous bastard. They want to pretend that he just might come back someday and restock the Uchiha clan."

She smiled at Neji. "I loved my Naruto-kun with all my heart but I was never strong enough to be there for him when he needed me. I could have given him friendship when he was all alone. I could have given him my love when he had none. I could have given him the comfort of knowing he would always have me there waiting for him no matter what. But I failed him, because I always waited for a better time to tell him what was in my heart. But even though he's gone now there is still one last thing I can do for him"

"Hinata what can you do for him now?"

"Isn't it obvious Neji?" Her smile seemed to split her face. "I can avenge him. I am going to become the greatest killer this miserable village has ever seen. Then I am going to track down Uchiha Sasuke and execute him. That is my dream now; it's the only thing that matters to me and the only thing I care about."

Neji deactivated his special vision. He didn't need it any more; it was obvious enough that the kind girl he had known all his life was gone now. All that was left was an empty husk. "Hinata that's the very same thinking that led Sasuke to be what he is now. If you go down the same path you will end no different."

She nodded as she picked up her gym bag, but continued to smile her cold smile. "I am sure that's true Neji, but I just can't seem to care anymore." She began to leave. "Please tell Kurenai and the others to stop worrying about me, I'm as well as I'm going to be."

Also, if you could, tell the Hokage I'll be applying for ANBU in a couple months. Please don't mention anything about black ops; I'll talk to her about it after I pass the exam. And if you could Neji do one more thing for me. If you care for someone tell them. Don't wait for a better time; there is never a better time than now." With that she left the field and headed home.

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There was a knock at the door. The young girl opened it. To her very great surprise there was her teammate standing there with a bouquet of the most beautiful pink roses she had ever laid eyes on. Tenten stared at him in shock.

"Are those for me?" Neji smiled and handed them to her.

"Yes."

"They're beautiful, thank you! Is there a special occasion?"

"Perhaps, I am hoping the special occasion will be our first date."

Her jaw dropped and she gawked at him. She had been flirting with him for *four years* and had just about given up hope of penetrating that thick skull of his. Now completely out of the blue he appears at her door step with roses. "Who are you and what have you done with Neji?"

He looked at her seriously, now this was the Neji she knew. "I know you have feelings for me Tenten, and I have had feeling for you as well for sometime now." She took a sudden breath until this moment she had never been sure whether or not he cared about her in *that* way. "I apologize for wasting so much time before acting on them, but if you care to I would very much like to have dinner with you tonight."

How does it happen that my dream comes true on a Tuesday? "Neji I would love to, but why now after all this time?"

He gently took her hand and stared happily at her soft warm smile. "I just decided now would be the best time."

## End of the path

The woman screamed and kept on screaming. The pain stopped and she sucked in breath. She looked up at the ninja who was kneeling over her broken body. The ninja was completely covered in black. A simple mask covered the ninja's face except for a pair of pupil less lavender eyes. "Please kill me." She whimpered.

Two fingers immediately stabbed down into her shoulder and fresh pain tore into her and she started screaming again. The ninja patiently counted to thirty and then pulled the fingers back. When the screams stopped she spoke to her in a soft and polite voice. "The pain ends when you tell me what I want to know. If you give me the information I need I promise I will make it quick and clean."

"All right," the woman whispered. "He is in grass country at..." Two fingers came down again, into her hip this time. Again she felt herself screaming. She was crying because she knew she was at the end of her endurance.

The ninja reached thirty and pulled her fingers back temporarily ending the torment. "I've told you before not to lie. You know I have to give you credit Karen; I can usually break people within ten minutes. But here you are coming up on two hours." She looked around at the empty laboratory. It was a mess. Not ten feet away were two bodies. "I mean usually when people hold out it's because they have some sort of hope. But that's not the case with you now is it? I mean your arms and legs are broken. All the guards and assistants are dead. There is no one who is going to come and rescue you. You're all alone now." The woman began crying harder. Hinata thanked Ibiki for his many lessons in psychological torture techniques as well as thanking Tsunade's on human anatomy. "Why are you fighting so hard when we both know how this is going to end? You've lasted two hours but I have all night, all week, all month if I need it."

"I can't tell you."

"Why not? The sooner you tell the sooner I end your pain."

"If I tell you you're going to kill him."

"That's true Karen-chan but why should that bother you? You'll be long gone by then. And given your *experiments* I doubt you could have any sort of moral concerns." She chuckled. "Besides where your soul is going I'm sure you'll be seeing him again real soon."

"I can't, just please kill me." She stabbed two fingers into her and began counting.

When she released she asked again, mildly curious to hear what the sadistic doctor would have to say. "So why can't you say?"

"Because I love him," she whispered.

Hinata felt her fists clench and had to restrain her self from breaking the woman's jaw. Instead Hinata took out a kunai and slammed it clear through her left shoulder blade. She began speaking even as the woman cried out. "Don't you dare use that word again or I'll hack off your arms and legs while you watch. Love? You don't know what that word means. I know what it really is to love someone more than your own life. Don't you dare compare your pathetic infatuation with what I feel. You don't love him and he sure as hell doesn't love you. All you have is some pathetic attraction that you've deluded yourself into thinking is love, but it's not. Comparing your feelings to mine is a joke; it's like comparing the fire of a candle to that of the sun."

Karen looked up through her tears. "You are Hyuga Hinata aren't you?" Hinata nodded. "The person you're talking about is Nar..."

"Say his name and I will hack off your right arm."

Karen gulped. "He told me about you, he said you were one of the kindest and gentlest people he had ever known."



"That's true I suppose, but that was a long time ago. I mean he was once a trusted and admired shinobi of the leaf. Things change."

Karen looked tired and broken. "You'll never stop will you?"

"No."

Karen let out a long sigh. "He is in fire country in an old run down temple outside Gakurra."

"That's only about twenty miles from Konoha!" Hinata could hardly believe it but her Byakugan confirmed that it was the truth. "Thank you Karen-chan, I promise you will feel no more pain."

"May I have a last request?" Hinata nodded. "Will you tell Sasuke I am sorry?"

"I will." Karen nodded her gratitude and shut her eyes. Hinata reached over and in one motion snapped her neck.

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Outside the lab entrance she signaled the all clear and the other three members of her team appeared.

"Burn it down." She handed one of them a sealed note written in code. "When you're done return and report to the Hokage. I have to take care of something."

"Captain you're not..."

She shook her head. "I will meet back up with you at ANBU headquarters later." She took off without another word. Given her reputation no one was going to question her.

At a small stream not more than a couple miles away she was refilling her canteen. The moment she had found out the location she had decided. She took a soldier pill to give herself a maximum amount of energy and stamina. She could reach Gakurra in 12

hours. If something went wrong the Hokage would have the information and would send out multiple teams to finish the job.

With her mask off she looked at her reflection in the stream. She was only 22, but a stranger would guess she was far older. She had never been considered a great beauty but she had often been referred to as pretty or cute. Well those times were long gone. Her face had several scars on it; including a large ugly burn on most of her right cheek and one that ran clear across her jaw from her right ear to the tip of her chin. If she had removed her ninja armor and clothing she would have seen other scars all over her arms, legs, and body. When she walked around town without a mask on children would sometimes cry and people would look the other way. No man would ever ask her out, but since the only one she had ever wanted was gone it didn't bother her any. She was proud of her scars and of everything else she had suffered in the past 6 years. She considered them nothing more than the price paid to become ultimate weapon of the ANBU black ops. She had driven herself mercilessly to gain power and had. She had mastered a dozen different weapons, four different fighting styles, over a hundred jutsus, and had developed her chakra to the point where it was almost as large as Tsunade's. She had become the greatest assassin ANBU had ever seen surpassing even Kakashi's records. And she had spent the last two and a half years on an S-rank mission given to her by the Hokage in secret.

That mission of course had been to track down and kill Uchiha Sasuke. No one outside her team knew, not even the Council. Tsunade had feared that if they found out they would interfere. In that time Hinata had not spent more than a month in Konoha. She had chased down every last lead, no matter how slim. She had killed his agents, destroyed his bases, crippled his organization, but somehow he always stayed one step ahead of her. And now her time was running out; Godaime Hokage was dying of liver failure. She had perhaps a month left. The woman who had loved Naruto as a son wanted justice done as badly as Hinata did. She was grimly holding on to life and her position as Hokage in order to give Hinata one last

chance. No one knew who would be the next Hokage, but it seemed likely her orders would be changed.

Hinata thought what it would be like to lose Tsunade. She was one of the few people she was still close to. One by one she had lost touch with her friends; Kurenai, Kiba, Shino, Shikamaru, Sakura and others as she could not find time for any of them. One of the great ironies of her life was that her father had finally seen value in her just as she had turned her back on him and her clan. Hanabi, Neji, and even Hiashi could not hold their own against her. Hiashi had offered to make her the heir and step down, only to have her decline and tell him she wanted nothing to do with him. It was odd but she thought she might have actually hurt him with her refusal. Not that she cared. She was somewhat close to her current teammates, but not in the same way she had been with team 8. Their work was too hard and she had to push too hard for them to get really friendly. The only other people she was close to were Neji, Tenten, and their son Hizashi. Whenever she was in Konoha he insisted they all spend time together, even if it was just for an hour as she got ready to leave on another mission. That was another of the ironies in her life that it was Neji who wanted them to be close and she was the one who kept people at a distance.

Well actually there was one other person she was still close to. She reached into her uniform and pulled out her most cherished possession. It was just a simple photograph that Kakashi had taken on a mission six long years ago. She looked at it and felt the pain and the longing come back in a rush. It was the only picture she had of her and the one she loved. There was a 16 year old Naruto with a huge grin on his face full of life and fun, one hand held out in a 'V' the other wrapped around the shoulder of a blushing girl who looked about ready to faint. Sometimes when she was alone at night she would look at the photo and pretend it was a picture of them on a date. She would let herself imagine that they had gotten together. Sometimes when she dreamed it was of their wedding day. She dreamed of a small house in Konoha somewhere filled with the laughter of children playing with their parents. She dreamed of him

standing before all of Konoha and proclaiming himself Rockudaime Hokage and swearing to protect and guide all of them. And some mornings when she woke up the dreams would seem real to her. She would be truly happy, expecting to find him asleep next to her. But then she would remember. Tears came to her eyes. It amazed her that a killer like her could even have a heart. She could torture someone for hours on end without blinking, but the sight of an old photo would break her and leave her a sobbing mess. Wasn't time supposed to heal all wounds? Why did it still hurt like this? "Naruto." She cried out his name and fell to her knees in sorrow.

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He was on his knees, his palms pressed together in prayer, eyes closed and mouth silently speaking the words his mother had taught him a lifetime ago. *May I be forgiven my sins.* He ended the prayer and opened his eyes. On the dusty altar before him were two candles and a picture frame bearing his clan symbol. Everything was silent. He waited patiently.

"Welcome Hinata." Only then did he hear her footsteps. She was about twenty feet directly behind him. He did not turn around or try to get up.

"Hello Sasuke. It's been awhile huh?"

"Yeah, six years, I presume the rest of your team is outside."

"No, I came alone."

Now he did turn around to look. She was in her normal black uniform except that her mask was gone. Her pose seemed to be relaxed. One hand was resting on the hilt of her katana the other on her hip. "This is personal isn't it?"

"Yeah, before we get started Karen asked me to tell you she was sorry."

He nodded. "Thank you, it's good to know she was loyal to me."

"Yes I suppose that would be a rare commodity for a missing nin, even one as powerful as you. If you don't mind me asking what god were you praying to?"

"I was praying to my ancestors."

She nodded, "Well I'll grant you that at least makes sense. I suppose they have no choice but to listen to the prayers of the last Uchiha. You *are* the last Uchiha?"

He slowly nodded. "I killed Itachi two months ago."

She tilted her head and looked at him. "Was it worth it?"

He considered that, he'd been asking himself the same question for two months. "I don't know. Right after I killed him I felt happy, like everything I'd done had been vindicated. All the sacrifices were worth it because I'd finally avenged my family. But then later I just felt empty. I wasn't an avenger anymore so what did I have?" They were both silent for a moment. "How is Sakura?"

"Pinky? We kind of lost touch. I hear she's fine though, Tenten and her are close. She has been married to Lee for two years now and I hear she is expecting in a couple months."

Sasuke closed his eyes. "I always hoped I would get to see her again. I wanted to thank her for not giving up on me."

"But she did." Sasuke opened his eyes. "After you killed... Naruto she stopped talking about you. If she still feels anything for you Sasuke she keeps it to herself."

"That's probably for the best, considering. I guess a part of me was hoping she would help me restore my clan."

Hinata laughed out loud. "Oh that's a good one; the heartless avenger who kills his best friend wants to be a dad." Sasuke scowled at her and slowly rose to his feet to face her. "Your heartbeats rising,

did I hurt your pride? I'm sorry *Sasuke-kun*, but if you wanted to restore your clan you should have stayed in Konoha, married Sakura, and had babies."

"I know this makes no difference Hinata, but if it's worth anything I am sorry. I truly regret the things I had to do."

"You still don't get it do you? You didn't *have* to do any of it. You made the choice to become an avenger. You chose to leave Konoha and abandon your friends. You chose to kill anyone who got between you and Itachi. You told Sakura the day you left that new paths would open. You knew what you were doing curse mark or no curse mark. You don't get to take it all back with an, 'I'm sorry,' now."

"What about you Hinata? You've killed more people than I have. You're an avenger as well."

She smiled. "I know, the difference is I don't pretend it was forced on me. I chose this, and I knew what it would cost."

He shook his head. "No, you don't, you won't know that until it's done." He took a deep breath. "After I killed Itachi I realized something, I finally understood why he let me live."

"You were just a kid."

He looked at her coldly. "There were other children in the Uchiha compound, babies too. I think Itachi went mad, but a part of him was sane enough to understand he couldn't live with his guilt. He wanted someone there to make sure he wouldn't have to." Hinata said nothing. He waited a moment. Then he shrugged and activated his curse seal to its second level. As he did so she calmly drew out her katana and dropped into a fighting stance. "I will say this one final time, I am sorry Hinata."

"So am I." Her breathing was calm and she felt her blood pounding in her ears. She was ready; everything she had done for six years

had led to this day. She dipped her sword. "Your blood on my blade," she whispered.

"Take it if you can." His hands flashed together as he took a deep breath and used his wings to fly up into the vaulted ceiling about 30 feet above her. **Grand fireball Jutsu**, he spat out three huge boulders of flame. She bolted forward towards him.

Their fight was vicious and by the end of it they were both nearly empty of chakra. He had tried to strike her down with his Black Chidori, but she was too fast for him. Naruto had told her once how Sasuke had nearly died in Wave country fighting Haku. Throughout their fight she had riddled him with hundreds of senbon needles, slowly paralyzing him. She had cut him with her katana several times, as the needles slowed him down she had gotten deeper cuts. And for all of Sasuke's ability and power he could not reach her or break through her ultimate defense.

In the end he lay broken on the temple floor, no longer able to even sit up, over a hundred needles sticking out of him. He had reverted from his curse seal back into human form. She saw he had the Mangekyo Sharingan activated but that was useless as long as she had her Byakugan.

"Oh Sasuke," she shook her head. "You should know from our academy days that while your eyes could stop every other girl they never did anything for me." She was calmly standing over him with her bloodied katana.

He actually smirked. "Your eyes always made you my perfect enemy. That's why I always avoided fighting you. That and I didn't want to kill another of my friends."

"We haven't been friends for a very long time Sasuke."

He deactivated his sharingan. "I know," he said sadly.

She looked down at him. The man she had hated and pursued for six long years. She couldn't believe it but she actually felt a tiny spark of sorrow for him. "This temple," she said. "It's less than twenty miles from here to the Hokage tower. You had no guards, no traps, and no defenses at all. And you were in a room with only one entrance. You were done running weren't you?"

He nodded, and seemed to be strangely at peace now that all the fighting was finally over. "With Itachi dead there's nothing for me now. Even the idea of restoring my clan is impossible, my enemies will never stop."

She looked down at his broken body and felt only sadness. So much blood so much death, for what? "Sasuke, if it means anything to you I am sorry, and I... forgive you."

He actually smiled up at her. "Thank you Hinata, that does mean something to me. You granted Karen a last request. May I also have one?"

"Of course."

"Upstairs you will find the room I was staying in. There is a letter by my bed, it's addressed to Sakura. Would you see that she gets it?"

"I will."

"There is one last thing Hinata. You asked me if it was worth it. It wasn't, I think you'll realize that soon." He shut his eyes. "Please end it now."

She lifted up her sword. "Good-bye Sasuke." Her sword fell and the last Uchiha was gone.

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One month later



It was two in the morning and she was staring up into the face of her beloved Naruto-kun. She had always thought it fitting that the statue showed him smiling at all the world. Some idiots claimed it was undignified, but they had never known him. She knew he would want them all to see him with a smile. She looked up into his face and let the pain wash over her. She gave into it and welcomed the tears. Sasuke had been right, it wasn't worth it. And deep down in her heart of hearts she knew Naruto would never have wanted this for her. She had changed completely from the girl he had known, and there was no going back. She had come here now because she had decided there was no going forward either.

Tsunade had died two days after Sasuke. She had held on to see the son of her heart avenged. With that done she had given up. No one was sure who the next Hokage would be, not that it mattered. With Tsunade gone one more connection to the world was lost. She had delivered the letter to Sakura just as she had promised. Sakura had read it and immediately become inconsolable. She had cried for days, with no one able to comfort her, not even her husband or her best friend Ino.

As always Neji had tried his best to help her; he had even offered to let her move in with them so she would be alone less. She had appreciated her cousin's kindness deeply, but had declined. She had changed too much to pretend she belonged anywhere. And she cared too much for Neji, Tenten, and their son to depress them with own pain. There were still missions of course, there were always bad guys to kill, and she was still the best of killers. She was healthy and young and might well have another forty or fifty years of life. Forty years, it sounded like a prison sentence to her. She looked up into his smiling face.

"Hello Naruto-kun, you probably already know why I've come here. I'm sure you're disappointed in me. Just like always I end up taking the easy way out. But you see you were always the one who gave me courage. I always wished I could be as brave as you were. But without you I can't find the courage. Please forgive me my sweet

Naruto-kun if I have let you down one more time. And know whatever happens to me my love is yours now and forever."

She pulled out her wakizashi and placed the tip below her rib cage. She whispered a silent prayer to Kami or to whoever was listening and asked for only one thing. That if a monster like her could be forgiven that she be allowed to see him just one last time. Then with all her might she drove her blade up and in.

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The pain was gone and there was only light, she heard his voice. *Hinata I love you! I am waiting come and be with me!* She was happy and went into the light unafraid.

THE END